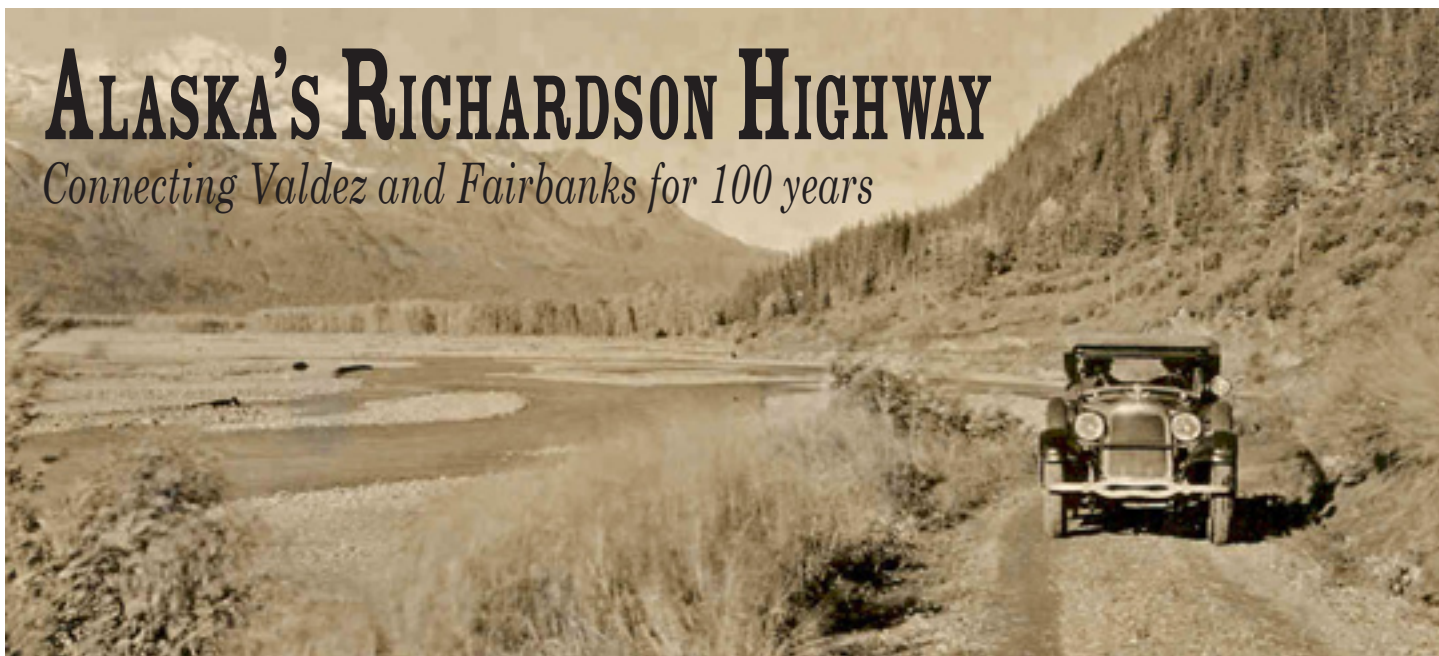


# ALASKA'S RICHARDSON HIGHWAY

*Connecting Valdez and Fairbanks for 100 years*



Automobiles began traveling the Richardson Highway in 1913. People often stopped to hunt and fish along the way.

In 1905, Congress passed the Nelson Act which would have far-reaching consequences for Alaska. A key purpose of the legislation was to promote the construction of roads and trails to benefit mining, trade, agricultural and manufacturing developments. The legislation created both a steady funding mechanism and also a proactive oversight board to direct the work. The new law also required that 70 percent of all funds collected from license fees in Alaska, outside of incorporated towns, were to be used for road building.

Equally important, the Nelson Act created a three-member board of road commissioners with responsibility to actively plan, create, upgrade, and maintain roads and trails. By law, its membership included “an engineer officer of the United States Army to be detailed and appointed by the Secretary of War.” The choice was Maj. Wilds Preston Richardson (1861-1929), a West Point graduate who had previously supervised construction of Army posts in the Alaska Territory beginning in 1897. Richardson would serve in his new post as the first President of the Alaska Road Commission from 1905 to 1917.

By 1915, under Richardson's tireless leadership, crews had constructed 2,216 miles of trails, 902

**Under the leadership of Wilds P. Richardson, Alaska's territorial roads and trails expanded dramatically.**

**Richardson left the Alaska Road Commission in 1917 to serve in World War I. He died in 1929 and is buried at West Point.**



miles of wagon roads and 577 miles of sled roads in Alaska. While most were primitive by today's standards, many were later improved. Among the most important was the establishment of what is known today as the Richardson Highway, Alaska's first highway, later named in honor of Maj. Richardson.

This amazing feat of construction, began with animal-powered machinery to supplement hand work, connected coastal Valdez with the booming gold rush camp of Fairbanks. When completed, it spanned more than 360 miles of difficult terrain including two major mountain ranges as well as permafrost soils and swampy bogs that still challenge Alaskan road builders today. While 1905 marked its initial transformation into becoming today's Richardson Highway, the road's origin dates back to the late 19th century.

In the early spring of 1899, the U.S. Army began cutting a 5-foot-wide pack trail out of the gold rush boomtown of Valdez to the gold fields of the Klondike. By the end of the summer of 1899, about 40 miles had been completed and another 53 miles surveyed and cleared. The following year, the military began building a telegraph line connecting Valdez to the newly established Fort Egbert at Eagle on the Yukon River near the Canadian border. Consequently, the primitive pack trail was also improved in many locations.

Two unexpected developments caused a change in the destination for the Valdez-to-Eagle trail — the discovery of gold in the Fairbanks region in 1902 and the further decline of the Klondike gold rush. Rather than proceed toward Eagle and the Klondike, the trail was redirected to Fairbanks. To serve the increasing number of travelers, various entrepreneurs built road-

## HISTORICAL FACT

Before 1905, Alaska had very few roads. One estimate is that fewer than 10 miles of roads existed in the entire territory at the start of the Klondike Gold Rush of the late 1890s.



houses along the way. One of the earliest was the Sourdough roadhouse which was built in 1903 and stood near BLM's Sourdough Campground until the roadhouse burned in late 1992.

After passage of the Nelson Act in 1905, work on the Valdez-to-Fairbanks Trail increased dramatically. By 1907, a winter sled road to Fairbanks was completed, followed by a wagon road in 1910. By 1913, enough additional improvements were made that motorized vehicles could make the trip. Alaska businessman and later politician Robert E. Sheldon (1883-1983) drove the first automobile over the highway in the summer of 1913. For several years after that, he operated an "auto stage" hauling passengers up and down the highway between



**The old Sourdough Roadhouse was one of the earliest facilities built to aid travelers along the trail north out of Valdez. It began in 1903 and stood near BLM's Sourdough Creek Campground until burning Dec. 27, 1992.**

## **HISTORICAL FACT**

The development of the Richardson Highway in the first decades of the 20th century is all the more remarkable when viewed in comparison to what was occurring in the Lower 48 States. No highway system existed linking the east and west coasts, with the first successful trip by car between the two coasts done in 1903 requiring many months to accomplish.

Valdez and Fairbanks. In the 1920s, the trips sometimes included requested stops so passengers could fish and hunt during the two-to three-day ride.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Richardson Highway was used so extensively by truckers that in 1933, tolls were temporarily placed on commercial vehicles as a way to encourage more shipping by railroad. In the 1940s, new roads were completed leading to connections off the Richardson Highway to

Anchorage (via the Glenn Highway), and the Lower 48 (via the Alaska Highway and Tok Cutoff). By 1957, the Richardson Highway was hard-surfaced and maintenance and improvement projects continue to this day. Now, 100 years and counting after the passage of the Nelson Act, we can take pride in celebrating the centennial of today's Richardson Highway, a most remarkable achievement.

—Robert King



**Primitive pack trails were expanded, allowing travel by horse-drawn wagons and later by automobiles. Travel time between Valdez and Fairbanks was dramatically shortened.**

*Historic photos courtesy of Robert King, personal collection*

